

THE ROMAN FARMER – AND MARKET DAY

Quintus' early years in Venusia left him with a deep love for the country. After he had become a successful poet in Rome, he was overjoyed to be given a small estate in the Sabine Hills to the north-east of the city. Here he would entertain his guests with vegetarian dinners suitable for the simple country life.

Quintus had eight slaves to run his Sabine farm. For his father, on the other hand, life would have been extremely hard. He would have grown enough food to keep his family alive, living in a humble cottage in Venusia and tramping out to the country every day to work on his farm as some peasants still do in modern Italy. Here he would have worked for most of the daylight hours through almost all of the year. The lists of farmers' tasks in Roman times show a break in the middle of the winter which lasted only a month. The summer drought may have allowed them some time off as well, though if it was possible to irrigate the land, that would have to be seen to.

Flaccus grew olives, vines, grain and vegetables on his farm. Oil from the olives provided the fuel for lamps and was used in soap and cooking, as in Mediterranean countries today. The vines produced wine, the grapes being trampled underfoot to extract the juice. Italy was also famous for honey and he may well have kept bees.

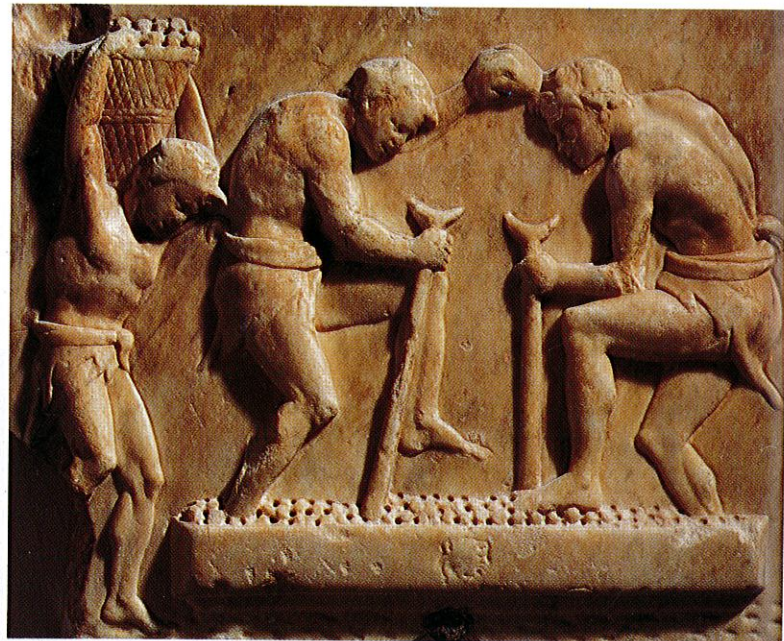
Two farmers' calendars survive from Rome, and here are the lists of jobs for May and September from one of them:

MAY

*Weed grain
Shear sheep
Wash wool
Break in young bullocks
Cut vetch (a legume)
Bless the fields
Sacrifice to Mercury and Flora*

SEPTEMBER

*Treat wine jars with pitch
Pick apples
Loosen soil around roots of trees
Feast in honor of Minerva*



Treading grapes to extract the juice for winemaking

The Romans always expressed the highest admiration for the simple country life, though they were more enthusiastic about praising it than living it! Virgil writes of an old pirate from Cilicia in Asia who had ended up farming in Southern Italy. He 'had a few acres of left-over land, and this a soil not fertile enough for bullocks to plough, not right for sheep and not suitable for vines. But he planted herbs here and there amid the thickets, and white lillies round about, and vervain, and the slender poppy, and matched in contentment the wealth of kings. Returning home late at night, he would pile his table with a feast for which he had paid nothing.' (How far can you believe this? Is it too good to be true?) For the Romans, farming stood for the qualities of tough simplicity that had made their nation great. One of their greatest heroes was a modest farmer, Cincinnatus, who was called from the plough to save the state, and, after defeating the enemy, at once went back to finish his ploughing (see chapter 15 below).

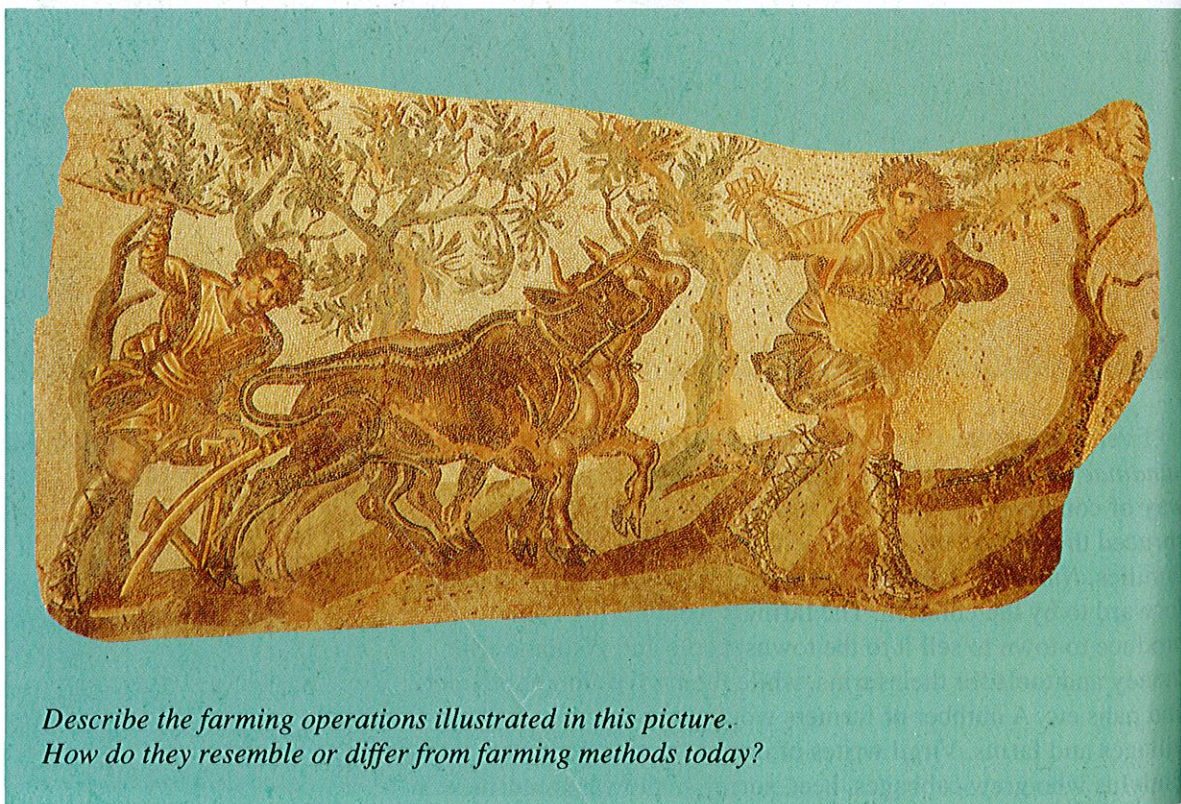


Poultry and fruit being sold
in a Roman market

Every eighth day there were market days. These were called *nūndinae* ('ninth-day affairs'), because of the Romans' inclusive way of counting (1+7+1). After seven days of hard work, people spruced themselves up and hurried to the market with their families. *Nūndinae* were regular school holidays, eagerly looked forward to by the children. The farmers would bring their produce to town to sell it to the townspeople and go home with money and tools for their farms, while their wives might buy pots and pans etc. A number of farmers would have lived in outlying villages and farms. Virgil writes of one of these, a peasant called Simylus who grew cabbages, beet, sorrel, mallow and radishes

for sale: 'Every market day he carried on his shoulder bundles of produce for sale to the city; and returned home from there, his neck relieved of its burden, but his pocket heavy with money.' Market day was also a good chance to visit a lawyer and do some business. And the townsmen might entertain some of their friends from the country at a celebratory lunch.

At the time when our story is set, Italy contained many vast country estates. On these, large-scale agricultural enterprises such as cattle ranching and the cultivation of vines and olives would be carried out. A fabulously wealthy freedman called Caecilius Metellus had 4,116 slaves on his estate. Many slaves who worked on such estates had a grim life. When not engaged in backbreaking work in chain gangs, they were housed in dreadful barracks. The only aim was to bring in as much money as possible for the usually absentee owners. An ancient writer called Varro talks about three types of farm equipment: 'the kind that speaks (i.e. slaves), the kind that cannot speak (i.e. cattle) and the voiceless (i.e. agricultural tools)'. These huge estates, which used slaves as machines, had originally caused massive unemployment among the peasant farmers. But by Horace's day slave labor had become more expensive and the *colōnus* had made a comeback. Alongside the vast estates there were small farms of just a couple of acres, and it was one of these that Horace's father worked.



*Describe the farming operations illustrated in this picture.
How do they resemble or differ from farming methods today?*